

You are here: [Home](#) ▶ [Research](#) ▶ [2011-2012](#) ▶ A Social Cognitive Science Approach to Threat and Uncertainty

2016-2017
2015-2016
2014-2015
2013-2014
2012-2013
2011-2012
2010-2011
2009-2010
2008-2009
2007-2008
2006-2007

A SOCIAL COGNITIVE SCIENCE APPROACH TO THREAT AND UNCERTAINTY



Principal Investigators: William Cunningham and Ingrid Haas, Department of Psychology

People are often confronted with political beliefs that differ from their own and can respond to these ideas in different ways. They may show tolerance by considering the ideas and deciding whether to incorporate them into their own beliefs, or they may show intolerance by refusing to consider the ideas at all.

In this project, William Cunningham and postdoctoral fellow Ingrid Haas examined the effects of emotion on political tolerance by attempting to resolve a paradox in the literature -- that uncertainty has been shown to increase both open-mindedness and close-mindedness to new ideas and information.

Cunningham and Haas resolve these conflicting findings by teasing apart two concepts that previously had never been controlled for separately -- threat and uncertainty. While most of the literature views threat and uncertainty as linked, they don't have to be. Threat suggests the potential for harm and always has a negative valence, while uncertainty can be either positive or negative.

To test these concepts, Cunningham and Haas ran two experiments randomly placing subjects into four groups: uncertainty with threat, certainty with threat, uncertainty without threat, and certainty without threat. They then tested the subjects on a series of questions designed to measure levels of tolerance.

In the first experiment, high threat was manipulated through mortality salience, asking subjects to describe their emotions about their own deaths and what will happen physically to their bodies. Low threat was manipulated with questions about dental pain.

In the second experiment, threat and uncertainty were manipulated through various scenarios of a person at the door. High threat involved someone trying to break into the house in the middle of the night (uncertainty) and someone definitely breaking in (certainty), while low threat involved the doorbell ringing in the afternoon (uncertainty) or seeing a friend at the door (certainty).

Both experiments yielded the same results: When threat was present, uncertainty was associated with greater levels of intolerance, but when threat was absent, uncertainty was associated with greater levels of tolerance. These findings have implications for understanding the role of emotions in politics.

Cunningham and Haas have continued this research by examining the effects of threat and uncertainty on executive functions such as mental set shifting, updating and monitoring, and inhibition of responses. Results from this research are forthcoming.



MERSHON CENTER

- About Us
- Research
- News
- Events

ARTS AND SCIENCES

- College of Arts and Sciences
- Academics
- About the College
- News and Events

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

- Office of International Affairs
- Center for African Studies
- Center for Latin American Studies
- Center for Slavic & East European

RESOURCES

- Events Calendar
- E-Newsletters
- Annual Reports
- Fact Sheet

Grants	Research	Studies	Experts List
People	Arts and Culture	East Asian Studies Center	Faculty Books
Publications	Alumni	Institute for Chinese Studies	Furniss Award
Contact		Institute for Japanese Studies	Knowledge Bank
		Institute for Korean Studies	
		Middle East Studies Center	



© 2013 Mershon Center for International Security Studies – College of Arts and Sciences

1501 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43201

Phone: 614-292-1681 | Fax: 614-292-2407

Request an alternate format of this page.

